

In Russia's Ethnic Republics, Pro-Kremlin Heads Run for Reelection — Popular Support Optional

By [Moscow Times Reporter](#)

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Acting Altai Governor Andrei Turchak presents the Order of Courage to the family of a soldier killed in the war in Ukraine. [er.ru](#)

Russia's republics of Altai, Bashkortostan and Kalmykia are set to vote for their regional heads in this weekend's nationwide elections.

Russia's third wartime elections are expected to yield few if any surprises, with candidates backed by the ruling United Russia party and the Kremlin expected to win by a landslide.

But for the heads of these three ethnic republics — which are among those [hit hardest](#) by Russia's [rolling](#) mobilization for the war in Ukraine — the path to reelection won't be a breeze as all three are set to reassume office amid plunging public approval and growing social tensions.

Altai

Kremlin-appointed Andrei Turchak will be seeking reelection as the head of Altai, a mountainous Siberian republic with a population of 200,000 people of which 30% are Indigenous Altai people.

Turchak, a St. Petersburg native and the son of a longtime Putin associate, is what Russian political observers call a “Varangian”: a Kremlin-loyal technocrat with no prior ties to the region sent there to rein in the local population and elites.

Independent election watchdog Golos [described](#) Altai as “consistently one of the most problematic regions for the federal authorities” where United Russia members have struggled to hold onto their governor seats since 2012.

Turchak, who previously served as deputy chairman of Russia’s upper house of parliament and as United Russia’s General Secretary, was [unexpectedly appointed](#) as acting governor of Altai in June in a move seen as a major career [downgrade](#).

Similar to his scandal-plagued predecessor Oleg Khorokhordin, Turchak was greeted with heavy skepticism by local elites.

To ensure the newcomer’s victory, only two other candidates were allowed to run against him — Oleg Dobrynin of the nationalist Rodina party and Alexandr Kirillov of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) — both of whom are largely unfamiliar to Altai’s voters.

“There have never been fewer candidates in any gubernatorial elections in any region in the modern history of Russia,” Golos [said](#).

Bashkortostan

Another governor election unprecedented for its lack of competition will take place in Bashkortostan, where incumbent Radiy Khabirov is standing for reelection nine months after his region witnessed some of the largest protests in wartime Russia.

Bashkortostan is Russia’s most populous ethnic republic with more than 4 million people. Indigenous Bashkirs comprise 31.5% of the population, with Russians representing 37.5% and Volga Tatars 24.2%.

Khabirov, 60, was appointed as Bashkortostan’s head by Moscow in 2018, replacing the largely unpopular Rustem Khamitov.

Unlike Turchak, Khabirov is a native Bashkir born and raised in the republic whose political career started in the office of its first president, [strongman Murtaza Rakhimov](#).

Despite his strong roots in the republic, Khabirov failed to win the hearts and minds of the Indigenous Bashkir population. He has been repeatedly accused of “selling off” Bashkortostan’s assets to Moscow and the [friends and family](#) of his wife, whose Armenian heritage is a [separate source of dissatisfaction](#) for Bashkortostan’s more nationalist residents.

In January, thousands [protested](#) the [imprisonment](#) of prominent Bashkir activist Fayil

Alsynov on charges of “inciting interethnic hatred.”

The case against Alsynov was opened based on a Khabirov-authored [denunciation](#) that observers and activists in Bashkortostan saw as an act of personal vendetta for Alsynov’s enduring popularity and the success of the Kushtau [protests](#) that he co-led.

At least 76 people are [facing](#) criminal charges in connection with January’s pro-Alsynov protests and two men detained in connection with the rally [died](#).

When confronted with overwhelming public support for Alsynov and the arrested protesters, Khabirov chose to [stage a rally in his own support](#). He also doubled down by [verbally attacking](#) activists and labeling them as “extremists” and “traitors,” which did little to placate his frustrated constituents.

To add to Khabirov’s troubles, [at least 15](#) high-ranking cabinet members are facing criminal prosecution for corruption.

Bashkortostan has suffered the highest death toll in the war in Ukraine of any Russian region, [according](#) to a tally maintained by BBC and Mediazona.

To eliminate the possibility of an effective protest vote, the Kremlin ensured that only four other candidates from aligned “opposition” parties would participate, while Khabirov [reportedly](#) refused to partake in any public debates ahead of the vote.

Kalmykia

Batu Khasikov, the current head of Kalmykia, a southern republic with a more than 60% Indigenous population, is also running for re-election with little popular support.

However, this year’s race won’t be the first time that the Kremlin has been forced to “clear the field” to guarantee victory for Khasikov, a former world kickboxing champion turned politician.

In 2019, the local electoral commission refused to register any candidates who held political weight in the region, allowing Khasikov to achieve a landslide [victory](#) with 82.57% of votes.

A year later, a group of senators from the region’s People’s Khural parliament [called](#) on President Vladimir Putin to dismiss Khasikov, citing his failure to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and the worsening state of agriculture in the region.

But the Kremlin ignored local elites and Khasikov will stand for reelection virtually [unchallenged](#).

Though the results of governor races in Russia’s republics — like elsewhere in the country — are largely predetermined, some opposition politicians are still calling on dissatisfied residents to go to the polling stations.

“Yes, these are not elections. No one even really talks about them, there is no campaigning. Everything is being done to ensure that no one goes to vote. So, we need to do the opposite,” [wrote](#) Lilia Chanysheva, an opposition politician from Bashkortostan who was freed in a

[historic prisoner swap](#) with the West last month.

“What the result of the vote will be is known and does not matter. The fact of visiting a polling station is our vote. How else in today's reality can we actively say ‘no!’ to someone who speaks to us from a position of strength?” she added.

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